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ETHICS IN MODERN FICTION.

VICTOR S. YARROS.

EXTRAORDINARY claims have been made by contemporary novelists and dramatists in behalf of fiction, or imaginative literature generally, as an agent or instrument of social and moral reform. The idea that fiction is an artistic and intellectual luxury does not satisfy our militant and progressive novelists, who not only resent any attempt to force on them rules of "composition" and form, notions of economy and unity and coherence, but repudiate and violate restrictions having reference to scope and subject-matter. Unlimited freedom is demanded by them in the name of the service they alone are capable of rendering to the cause of social reconstruction and progress.

The leader of this group is H. G. Wells, a wide-awake, impressionable and restless novelist. In a recent essay he wrote: "The novel is to be the social mediator, the vehicle of understanding, the instrument of self-examination, the parade of morals and the exchange of manners, the factory of customs, the criticism of laws and institutions, and of social dogmas and ideas." If the novel is to be and do all this, it follows that, as Mr. Wells further says, "the novelist is going to be the most potent of artists." He will, of course, tell stories, and take some pains to make them interesting and attractive—for on no other terms are readers to be procured—but his chief object will not be to amuse, to banish boredom, but to elevate man and society. The novelist will "present conduct, devise beautiful conduct, discuss conduct, analyze conduct, suggest conduct, illuminate it through and through."

Now, novelists have always presented conduct—good, bad and indifferent conduct. Not a few have "illuminated it through and through" without "discussing" it and "analyzing" it in pages or sections of polemical and didactic writings. But it is precisely for the liberty of stopping

at any point, interrupting the narrative and delivering a sermon or essay on a relevant topic that Wells and others are boldly contending. Again, novelists have always criticized laws and institutions, dogmas and ideas, but it appears they have done this too timidly, too indirectly, too artfully. Laws of form and composition have hampered them more or less, and this handicap must be thrown off!

Frankly, if the emancipated novelists and dramatists expect support or even sympathy from theoretical or practical sociologists, they are likely to suffer disappointment. Serious thinkers and earnest social reformers care for literary and dramatic art far too much to rejoice in, or even remain indifferent to, the degradation and disfigurement of the novel or the play. They do not think, moreover, that such degradation and disfigurement would prove, either in the short or long run, of any perceptible benefit to Social Science, or to scientific or philosophical thought.

There are certain social services that the artist can render without violating the laws of his province. By stimulating the imagination, by exciting interest, by arousing pity and compassion, by provoking thought and discussion, by making men and women uncomfortable, discontented, ashamed, determined to "do something," the true artist can contribute his share toward the eradication of an evil and the solution of a grave but neglected problem. It was legitimate for a Dickens to deal with the horrors of the debtor's prison, or with the scandals and injustice of the law's delays and senseless technicalities. It was legitimate for a Victor Hugo to describe the last hours of a convict condemned to die, in a bit of thrilling fiction, for the purpose of strengthening the movement for the abolition of capital punishment. It was legitimate—pace Professor Paul Shorey, as we shall see,—for Mr. Galsworthy to hold, in "Justice," the mirror up to the nature of our system of law, justice and prison-discipline.

These are a few illustrations out of many that show how artists, while remaining artists and satisfying the demand

for unity, economy and form, can promote the cause of reform and progress. But what is the method, the procedure, of these artist-reformers? They present pictures, they depict reality, they portray life as it is, and if morals are drawn and lessons extracted from these pictures and tales, it is life itself that teaches the morals or lessons. Of course, the artist, in going to life, must select typical cases, rather than exceptional ones. If hard cases make bad law, unusual and rare cases make bad art. The readers remain cold and indifferent. They feel that an illegitimate assault is being made on their emotions. They resent the trick, the utterly artificial arrangement of the facts of the situation. It is only when the artist deals honestly with common and familiar experience that he is capable of arousing sympathy and stirring his public to action.

But, if life faithfully pictured teaches its own lessons, then the deliberate and didactic preaching and teaching of the artist is superfluous, gratuitous, needless, offensive to the taste of his cultivated readers or auditors. The novel, the drama, is no place for arguments, discussions and polemics. *Arguments* against capital punishment should be addressed to legislators and would-be legislators, to influential executives, to civic bodies, to political assemblies. The artist cannot interrupt his story to present statistics, to institute comparisons, to refute misconceptions, to meet objections. The notion that you can beguile people into reading arguments in novels when they will not read them in pamphlets, newspapers or sermons, is baseless. The sacrifice of art for the sake of social advantage is almost invariably a vain sacrifice. The story is marred, while the hoped-for benefit fails to materialize, for the reader learns to skip.

The sociologist or the scientific reformer, therefore, will not ask of the artist the useless sacrifice of his art. He will appreciate the artist's aid when given, but he will demand that it be given within the limits assigned by the rules of artistic composition and form. He will not expect the artist to do work for which art is not fitted. He will not

expect the artist to insert editorial or magazine articles, or analytical arguments, into the pages of a narrative. He will, therefore, shake his head doubtfully at Mr. Wells's promise, or threat, to discuss and analyze conduct and make the novel the particular vehicle of direct criticism, advocacy and reconstruction.

Let us, after these general observations, undertake a brief comparative study of two of the most famous and successful of current examples of sociological fiction. One of these, Mr. Galsworthy's tense drama, "Justice," will illustrate the right method, while the second, Mr. Wells's "Research Magnificent," a shapeless and formless novel, will illustrate the wrong method, "how not to do it"—how not to use fiction as a vehicle for social criticism.

The title of Mr. Galsworthy's play has an ironical sound. The author doubtless intends his auditors and readers to ask, after the last tragic scene, "Is this our law? Is this our justice? Is this our way of correcting and reforming criminals, or of safeguarding the public interest? Can we do no better than this in this age of pragmatism, new realism, science, radical innovations, bold and fearless inquiry into origins and meanings?"

Professor Paul Shorey, in a recent lecture, complained of the intellectual "dishonesty" of Galsworthy in this social drama. But Professor Shorey has an erroneous idea of the playwright's intention or implied moral. Mr. Galsworthy does not condemn punishment and correction as such; he does not overlook society in his compassion for the criminal; he does not indorse the notion of personal irresponsibility; he does not advocate non-resistance to evil and aggression within the body politic. Neither does he shirk the main problem or commit the blunder of selecting a rare, exceptional case. Just what does he do? The answer depends on our interpretation of the plot.

Here is what takes place. A young clerk in a London law office forges his employer's check and steals a sum of money. The offense is his first. In committing it he yields to almost irresistible temptation. He is a weak, not

a vicious, character. An intelligent judge and jury would, under an intelligent law, inflict a mild but sufficiently deterrent punishment on the young clerk. The too mechanical system inflicts on him a severe and degrading punishment.

Certainly there is a difference between a rational penalty and an irrational one, between a penalty calculated to deter and a penalty calculated to embitter and poison a criminal's mind. The student of criminology is aware of the difference.

Galsworthy's play undoubtedly stimulates thought along this line and suggests fruitful questions. Granted that young Felder (certainly a type) deserved restraint and correction, what form should that correction have taken? Was solitary confinement a rational form of discipline? Did it tend to strengthen Felder's weak will, to impress upon him the need of resisting temptation, or the sanity and fairness of society's aims in sending him to jail? Work, a chance for study, an opportunity to use his brains in prison, to co-operate, perhaps, in maintaining discipline among the convicts—it is such things as these that tend to reclaim convicts and render them safe and useful members of society after their release. Auditors feel and say these things while watching the trial and prison scenes.

So far, then, "Justice," by holding the mirror up to nature, teaches common sense lessons. Our sympathy with the convict is not maudlin; it is thoroughly rational and worthy.

And what happens next? The convict is at last freed. He has suffered terribly and unjustly for his sin, his weakness, his folly. How does organized society meet him in his effort to rehabilitate himself? How do the police treat him? What is done to protect him from idleness and temptation?

Mr. Galsworthy again gives us certain episodes and scenes—typical, honest, lifelike episodes and scenes—that answer these questions. The dramatist does not utter one "didactic" sentence. But the final scenes are as eloquent

as any sermon on "after treatment" of convicts, especially of convicts much sinned against by the law and by careless society. "Justice" is true art, if not exactly high or subtle art. It is honest and significant art.

But what is Mr. Wells's "Research Magnificent"? Form it does not even claim. It is a loose, inartistic narrative with many asides, comments and polemical observations. Its plot has no center and no unity. Scenes are laid in several places, and any other places would have served as well as those chosen by the novelist. There is nothing "inevitable" in the development or climax. Everything is manufactured, invented. As to any lesson or moral, none emerges. Mr. Wells evidently has certain notions concerning aristocracy, true and false, and concerning the obligations of a true and high-minded aristocrat. We may or may not sympathize with these ideas. At the best, they are nebulous and insular. But the story itself, with all the incidents and adventures imagined by the author, leads to no definite or firm conclusion.

Here is the story in a nutshell. A young and intelligent Englishman, whose mother divorced his provincial and commonplace father and married a titled surgeon, finds himself at the threshold of life the possessor of a large fortune. *Noblesse oblige*; the young aristocrat and millionaire feels that he owes service to society in return for his independence and affluence. To do nothing, to amuse himself, to waste time and talent, seems to him not only dishonorable but doubly dishonorable in an aristocrat. Therefore he decides to fit himself for a part worthy of his powers and opportunities. So far so good. But the young man finds that he is deficient in physical courage, and how can a man be useful without courage? It becomes necessary to develop his courage, and the author puts him through various "stunts"—pardon the colloquial word—with that end in view. Of the need of moral courage, we hear nothing. Perhaps every aristocrat is born with moral courage! Let that pass, however.

The proper physical equipment having been secured, the

young aristocrat starts out to study men and institutions, governments and economic and social systems. He visits Russia, among other adventures, and we get some very superficial and journalistic pages on the Russian revolutionary movement. The aristocrat learns nothing worth while in Russia—of course not. He pursues his futile travels and “investigations,” and the last scene is laid in South Africa, where there are strikes, riots, capital-and-labor problems, as well as bewildering race problems. The young aristocrat and “researcher” learns nothing there, either. Again, how could he? But he gets shot in a street riot and dies of the wound. The research thus ends abruptly and futilely. The young man had reached no conclusions and was not ready for any noteworthy rôle in society. Had he lived, traveled and investigated for another decade or two, he might or might not have found himself, have decided to join this or that party, school or movement. Just why he is cut off by his maker in his prime, we cannot tell. Accidents happen, and tourists with missions may get shot in street riots and violent strikes. But many more escape and betake themselves to pastures new.

What, precisely, does this story teach us? Nothing whatever. Was there conscious irony in Mr. Wells's title—“The Research Magnificent”? Hardly, for Mr. Wells is not the man to content himself with ironic hints. He demands unrestricted freedom of comment and discussion, as we have seen. He demands the fullest recognition of the novelist's right to stop and analyze character and conduct. In this novel he strangely refrains from exercising this right where such exercise might have been most useful. The young aristocrat was plainly naive and foolish in his notions of social research. He need not, in point of fact, have left London. Russia and India and South Africa severally have baffling and interesting problems galore, but a young Briton intending to enter parliament, or write books, or deliver lectures, by way of playing his part and rendering service to humanity, has plenty to do at home

studying the British land question, the British system of taxation, the wage system, the platforms of the Labor and Socialist parties, the problem of Ireland, the problem of popular education. The young aristocrat might have found abundant occupation in studying the Fabian tracts on rent and interest, the defence of so-called individualism by Mallock, the theories of Spencer and of the Liberty and Property Defence League. Russia and South Africa can teach a young and anxious Briton nothing *fundamental*. The fundamental and essential problems of government, industry and society are the same everywhere—at least, the same in all civilized and advanced countries. The social researcher would better stay at home, mingle with the various classes, elements and strata of his own land, avoid needless complexities and realize how difficult and intricate the problem of social justice is under the most favorable circumstances. There are bitter and violent strikes in London and in Manchester. There are riots in Dublin and in the Ulster counties. It is the business of a “free” novelist like Mr. Wells to make this plain to young and earnest men of independent fortune and leisure.

The fact is, thousands of men and women, young and old, aristocratic and plebeian, hard-working and persons of leisure, are and long have been conducting the “research magnificent.” Some of them have reached conclusions, while others are still at sea, oppressed by doubts and misgivings. It is strange that Mr. Wells should have failed to realize and bring home this simple truth.

The first duty of analysts and interpreters of character and conduct, let me repeat, is to make sure that the character and conduct are typical, worth interpreting. Peculiar, pathological instances are of no value as a basis for generalizations. Social fiction and the social drama should concern themselves with the normal, the significant, the truly symptomatic. The right interpretation of significant phenomena is as difficult as it is necessary to the statesmen, the reformer, the moralist. Let men of letters study and interpret social, economic, and moral phenomena, for it is

true no human activity or interest is alien to them. But they must never forget that they are artists first and interpreters in the second place. Their business is first of all that of telling a good story, of conceiving and developing an interesting and alluring "plot." When they turn essayists, preachers, partisan controversialists or commonplace philosophers—as most of them do when they subordinate art to sermonizing—we get neither literature nor helpful interpretation.

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